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ABSTRACT

This study examined characteristics of never married fathers adjudicated in the Third Judicial Circuit of Michigan as legal and biological fathers. Participating were 39 fathers with Parenting Time Orders (PTO) and 25 with Reserved Parenting Time Orders (RPTO) (the father lacks legal parental access to his child). Sixty percent of the fathers were African-American, 34 percent Caucasian, 3 percent Hispanic, and 1.6 percent Native American, ranging in age from 16 to 54 years. Findings indicated that none of the fathers currently resided with the mother of their child, although 16 PTO fathers and 8 RPTO fathers had done so at one time. Twenty-three PTO fathers and 12 RPTO fathers felt extremely or quite close to their children. All the fathers who felt extremely or quite close to their child enjoyed activities with them. Those describing the relationship as not very close either did not have access to their child or had limited interaction. Fathers who spent parenting time involved in activities with extended family or the child's friends reported a more secure parent-child relationship. Fathers generally wanted their name on the child's birth record and wanted their child to have their last name. Fathers felt their child support payments were either too high or about right. About half the fathers felt that child support and court-supported Parenting Time were connected. Payment and arrearage child support history varied greatly among both groups. Recommendations based on these findings included increasing opportunities for involvement of fathers with their children, and educating young adults to prevent them from becoming fathers before they are financially and emotionally ready. (Contains 34 references.) (KB)

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SUMMARY OF UNWED

FATHER'S SURVEY

APRIL 1996

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Father absence, particularly in paternity cases, should be viewed as an apocalyptic indicator of the status of the American family's transition into the 21st century. Despite the scale and social consequences of unwed parents, it continues to be minimized, ignored or denied. Society must become more aware of the father's unique and irreplaceable contributions to the lives of their children.

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INTRODUCTION

Every child deserves a father who assists with supporting him or her both in terms of financially and emotionally. In about three of every four cases of children born outside of marriage in the United States, fathers have not been legally identified(1). The Minority Report of the United States Commission on Interstate Child Support stated that "this level of failure in acknowledging or identifying paternity is our society's most extreme version of father deprivation, condemning many children to its multiple risks of poverty, welfare dependency and psychological stress(2)."

For years, governmental and society interest in never married parents was of a minimal nature. However, the interest in never married parents has dramatically escalated in the two previous decades. The United States is the world's leader in fatherless families(3). Every day in Michigan, eighteen teenage mothers (ages 15-17) give birth(4). In the United States, 1,407 teenage mothers (ages 15-17) give birth(5). In 1993, the rate for births to unmarried mothers in Detroit was 71%, the highest in the nation(6.) Children of this population have difficult futures ahead of them unless the significance of both parents being partners in raising the child can be concisely indicated to them. In Michigan, the most critical factors that disproportionately affect children in single parent homes include: low income, lack of parental guidance. . . Parental involvement weakens because one parent has less time and authority than two, and instability in income and housing among single parent families can diminish the parental role(7).

According to figures from the Michigan Office of Child Support, there has been an increase in single parent births from 18.6% of the total births in Michigan in 1979 to 35.1% in 1994. Since 1991, this figure has been quite constant at 35%. In 1994, Wayne County had 34,945 total births. Of these, 17,819 (51%) were to unmarried women. However, only 4,220 (24%) of these unmarried births were acknowledged at the hospital; leaving 76% of the children born to unwed parents without an acknowledgement of fatherhood. Other large counties such as Oakland County had 3,969 (20%) births to unwed mothers, out of a total of 15,840. Only 48% of these unmarried births were acknowledged. Kent County had 26% of all births to unmarried women and 53% of these births were acknowledged(8). Wayne County has historically had 52% to 56% of all single parent births in the State of Michigan. The Wayne County Friend of the Court states that nearly 10,000 paternity cases are initiated each year(9).

For those professionals that interact with the paternity population, it is widely recognized that family dynamics vary

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considerably. While there are numerous articles and books that are related to teenage mothers and fathers, the broader issue of paternity has only recently become a focus of researchers. Some parents are parents because of a short intense physical relationship that produced a child. These parents have not had a relationship to speak of; instead, their personal interactive history is virtually nonexistent. Others have had long-term relationships that may include years of residing together and may include numerous children. Those of us who have interacted with this population have been convinced that there exists an informal network of paternity establishment and support provisions that do not include the involvement of the Court systems. These fathers who informally admit paternity are more likely to acknowledge legal paternity when approached by the Court.

This preliminary study/survey was conducted to begin ascertaining responses from never married fathers as it relates to their interaction with their children. The cases that involve Paternity Parenting Time evaluations have steadily increased in the last five years through the Family Counseling and Mediation Department. It is hopeful that information such as this may be utilized through different arenas for future endeavors.

DEMOGRAPHICS

One Hundred-Sixty surveys were mailed to never married fathers who were adjudicated in the Third Judicial Circuit of Michigan to be the legal and biological fathers. The surveys mailed to the fathers were separated into two categories with eighty fathers shown by Court records to have a Parenting Time Order (PTO) entered and eighty fathers shown to have a Reserved Parenting Time Order (RPTO) entered (Reserved Parenting Time means that there is not a current Parenting Time Order in effect, thus not providing the father with legal parental access to his child and limiting the Court's enforcement ability of Parenting Time denials).

In order to receive a clearer perspective on the issue of child support and Parenting Time access, the cases were randomly selected from cases referred to the Family Counseling office during 1991-1992. Sixty-four fathers responded to the survey; forty-five surveys were returned as undeliverable (further review of the court computer and court files indicated that there was no address change for the father) and fifty-one fathers did not return their surveys. Twenty-four of the respondents had more than one child with the same mother. However, for the purpose of this preliminary assessment, only the information on the oldest child of the never married parents was considered. Of the 64 respondents, 39 had Parenting Time Orders and 25 had Reserved Parenting Time Orders.

Thirty-nine (60%) of the fathers are African-American; twenty-two (34%) are Caucasian; two (3%) are Hispanic and; one (1.6%) is a

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Native American.

At the time of the birth of the children, the father's ages ranged from sixteen to fifty-four. The fathers who had PTO's were aged seventeen to fifty-four and fathers with RPTO's ranged from sixteen to thirty-six.

EMPLOYMENT

In general, the employment status of the fathers who responded consisted of a mixture of blue collar employment that included automobile mechanics, custodians and plumbers. Five of the fathers that responded were unemployed, one was retired and two were receiving government disability resources.

EDUCATION

Educationally speaking, of the thirty-nine fathers with PTO's, nine have a 11th grade or under education, twenty-three have graduated from high school, six have a college degree and one has other training. Sixteen of those with at least a high school education have completed additional education/vocational training. Of the twenty-five fathers with a RPTO, five have less than a 11th grade education, seventeen have a high school education, one has a college degree and one did not respond. Three of those fathers with at least a high school education have also completed additional education/vocational training.

Living Arrangements

Society needs to strengthen the legal connection between fathering a child and being responsible for that child. The legal establishment of paternity and effective collection of child support are only additional to having fathers involved in their childrens lives. If we can connect these fathers to their children at an early age, research demonstrates that child support payments extend beyond the first year and these fathers will more likely take an active interest in their childrens lives.

Sixteen of the fathers with a PTO had been residing with the mother of their child. Twenty of the thirty-nine fathers with a PTO had been involved with the mothers for under a year and eighteen had a relationship of at least one year (one father did not respond to the question).

Eight of the fathers with a RPTO had been residing with the mother of their child. Fourteen of these fathers had been involved with the mother for under a year and eight had at least a year relationship (three fathers did not respond to the question).

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Nine of the fathers with PTO's are married and twenty-five are not and four did not respond to that inquiry. Of these twenty-five, only five are separated or divorce, indicating that twenty of the fathers have remained never married. Six of the fathers with RPTO's were married, seventeen were not married and two did not respond. Of these seventeen, only three were separated or divorced, indicating that fourteen remain never married.

None of the fathers in this survey were currently residing with the mother of their child. Three of the fathers with a PTO are living with another woman while five of the fathers with a RPTO are now living with another woman.

Of the fathers with a PTO, five had access to their child as recent as within the last two days, nine had access two to seven days ago, five had access within the last month and nine had access over a month ago. Three fathers with a RPTO had access to their child within the last two days, four had access two to seven days ago, three had access within the last month and eight had access over a month ago. Fifteen of the fathers with a PTO stated that they felt extremely close to their children, eight fathers felt quite close and five felt fairly close. Eight of the fathers with a RPTO felt extremely close to their child, four felt quite close and two fathers felt fairly close to their child.

> *"Visits are not consistent because the mother gets mad at me and takes it out on the child by denying my visitation."*
>
> *"Child support is geared against the man. The system fails the child when they (the child) are not able to get everything due them . . . my contact."*

Fifty-seven percent of unwed fathers with children no older than two years of age visited their children more than once a week; however, only 23% of the fathers were in frequent contact with their children at age 2 and ½ years or older(10). One in five children in female headed families had not seen their fathers for five years(11).

Children whose fathers were involved with them as newborns tend to deal better with friends, school and emotions later in life. Some children who had this high interaction with their fathers scored higher on developmental tests of motor skills and problem solving. Father contact with new-borns also assist them with becoming more receptive of change, less fearful of new experiences and better able to establish close ties with more than one person. Fathers relate to children differently: fathers play physical games and talk in adult tones more often than women do. They stimulate different muscle groups and parts of the brain and these are different than women do. More important in another aspect is that fathers who are involved with their children early on setup a

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pattern of caring that lasts a lifetime. Research shows that fathers who have been able to touch, hold and talk to their infants during the first few weeks are more likely to continue to be occupied with them as they age(12).

A good father understands that he has an obligation to ensure not, only the well-being of his children, but also the well-being of the mother of his children. For unwed fathers, it is important to remain supportive and respectful of the mother of your children. Cooperation with each other regarding discipline, schooling and establishment of privileges is essential(13).

Fathers must remember that threatening to harm or kill one's partner...., continually criticizing one's partner in public or in the privacy of your home...., name calling and humiliation are a form of domestic violence that seriously impacts children (14).

All of the fathers in the survey that stated that they felt either extremely close to their child or quite close to their child noted that they enjoyed activities such as playing sports, doing housework, fixing and eating meals together, doing an indoor hobby together, assisting with homework, engaging in outside activities together or watching television together. Fathers that described their relationship with the child as not very close were either those fathers who did not have access with the child or described limited interaction such as letting the child play alone. Additionally, those fathers that related that they spend their Parenting Time involved with activities with grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles and friends of the child reported a more secure relationship feeling with their child.

The single most important thing that you can do to help,your community and our nation to become father friendly is to be a responsible and committed father yourself. Good fathers make children their priority in their lives. Giving your children time, keeping your commitments to your children and accepting responsibility for enduring your children are healthy, well fed, safely housed and well-educated is your responsibility. A good father listens to, values and encourages his children*(15)*.

> *"Sometimes I can't pay my child support but I take care of her with love and kindness and all her needs when she is with me."*

Studies have shown that fathers with arrangements for shared parenting time. . .tend to pay child support with more regularity than fathers with no such arrangements (Federal OSE). Paternal parenting time has been found to consistently be positively related to payment of child support(16). The more that the Court can do to provide parenting time for the single parent father by evaluating the situation and scheduling parental access, the greater the likelihood is that these fathers will also continue their responsibility of providing financial support for their children. This leads to a better quality of life for

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the child.

Preliminary research by this author that relates to the potential correlation between an increase in child support payments and fathers with a Parenting Time Order and a decline in child support payments without an Order for Parenting Time is promising. The findings could assist this Court and others with the understanding that a similar program could be encouraging. In viewing the computer records of father's payments to the Court, those fathers with a Parenting Time Order had submitted payments in excess of $1.6 million, with an arrearage of slightly more than $1 million. Fathers without a Parenting Time Order had made payments of almost $1.1 million and had arrearage of nearly $1.3 million (17).

These fathers were also indicating that they wanted their name on the childs birth record and wanted the child to have his last name. Eighteen of the fathers with a PTO have their names on the birth certificate and 32 stated that it was important for the child to have his last name. Fathers with a RPTO had their names on the birth certificate eight times and 17 fathers said it was important for the child to have his last name. In Michigan, twenty-six percent of all births are to women who do not name the father.

"He is part of me, my blood."

"We're part of each other. If the mother can have her name on the birth certificate, why not me?"

"I want to be known as the father!"

"I am the father and it's my responsibility."

"I want everyone to know that I am her father and I love her very much."

"My father's name was on mine and I love my daughter."

"I want him to carry my last name on."

We need to focus on his ongoing participation in the business of being a parent instead of focusing on obtaining a check. While the fathers income is clearly important, so are his moral strength, the role model he provides for his son, the love and self esteem he provide for his daughter and the security his presence provides.

BIRTH OF THE CHILD

What is the importance of fathers being involved with their children? Once paternity has been legally established,

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children can receive government benefits, social security benefits, military benefits, health insurance benefits, dependents benefits from workman's compensation programs, rights of inheritance, establishment of the legal foundation for custody and parenting time, medical histories and genetic information will be available, and the emotional and psychological benefits that include a sense of identity with a birth certificate with their fathers name on it and their heritage through identification with fathers. We need to let mothers and fathers know that it is a responsibility of both parents that they participate in their childrens lives. The real test of fatherhood is not in creating this child but in the willingness to care for this child (18).

Seventeen of the fathers with a PTO were present at the hospital for the birth of their child and eight of the fathers with a RPTO were present. Many of these fathers described this event as "the most wonderful thing they ever witnessed" or in other similar emotional terms. As noted above 40% of the fathers had their names on the birth certificates and 76% indicated that it was important for the father's name to be on the birth certificate.

Immediately after birth, children quickly become attached to both parents and need two active parents for their optimum development. Fathers typically provide socialization, stimulate curiosity, effect discipline and provide protection while mothers typically fulfill the role of care giver and thus meet the childs needs for security(19). Fathers. . .make infants more receptive to change, less fearful of new experiences and better able to form trusting relationships with others(20).

CHILD SUPPORT RECORDS

> *"I pay for the child's needs while with me on parenting time yet I can't claim that-I buy food for him, get his hair cut and purchase clothing."*
>
> *"The mothers are on welfare and we have to pay an unreasonable amount."*
>
> *"The mothers need to be checked as closely as the fathers are."*

Fourteen of the fathers with a PTO stated that they felt that they pay too much child support, **none** felt that they paid too little and nineteen felt that child support payments were right. Eleven of the fathers with a RPTO felt that they paid too much child support, one felt he paid too little and eleven stated that their child support payments were right.

Eighteen of the fathers with a PTO stated that they felt child support and Parenting Time was connected and fifteen did not

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think so. Eleven of the fathers with a RPTO felt it was connected and fourteen did not.

> *"If you pay child support, you should be able to see your child."*

Twenty-one of the PTO fathers stated that child support and Parenting Time should be connected and twelve did not; compared to twelve of the RPTO fathers who said it should be and twelve who did not.

> *"I think they should be connected. If I spend my money for my child, I should have the right to know how he is living."*

The payment of child support, even in low amounts, is often crucial for the mother and child and may mean the difference between living above or below the poverty line. The economical consequences of a parents absence are often accompanied by psychological consequences, which include higher than average levels of youth suicide, low intellectual and educational performances and higher than average rates of mental illness, violence and substance abuse(21). Poverty is associated with early school failure, crime, feelings of hopelessness and despair (22)

Sixteen of the PTO fathers and nine of the RPTO fathers stated that the mothers believed child support and Parenting Time was connected; fifteen of the PTO fathers and thirteen of the RPTO fathers felt that the mother did not believe there was a connection.

"There are two reasons why women have children- money and to keep a man who doesn't want them." "Some of these mothers need to give up on wanting a relationship."

"If she withholds my visitation with my child, then the Court should withhold my child support check."

"Let me keep my 40-hour pay and take my income tax refund and any overtime pay."

"I get frustrated because I don't know where my child support goes."

In analyzing the court records of payments and arrearage for the two different groups: those with PTO's and those with RPTO's, the following information was available:

Thirty-seven (two fathers did not provide identification to consult records) of the fathers with PTO's have paid child support in the amount of $334,593 (an average of $9043.05) and are in arrearage of $139,445 (an average of $3768.78). Payment history and arrearage history fluctuate greatly, ranging from fathers that have paid more than $22,000 to those who have paid

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$8 or zero. Arrearage ranges from overpayment of nearly $400 to more than $17,000. Fathers who have seen their child within the last month account for 54% of the total child support payments made ($180,681) while accounting for only 42% of the arrearage ($58,468).

"There should be alternative to paying financial support."

"Fathers need to be understood more and the Court should take more time to understand our needs."

The twenty-five fathers with a RPTO have paid $81,853 (an average of $3274.12) and have arrearage of $140,211 (an average of $5608.44). Here again, payments fluctuate from zero paid to almost $12,000 and arrearage of an overpayment of $100 to $19,000 owed. Fathers who have seen their child within the last month account for 35% of the child support payments made ($28,356) and accounted for 67% of the total arrearage ($55,227).

In 1980, 11,000 (56.8%) of single mother families with children under the age of six in Wayne County were living below the poverty line. In 1990, the numbers had risen to 14,000 (64%). The statistics were similar for the State of Michigan as a whole: in 1980, 28,600 (54.7%) were below the poverty line and in 1990, 35,600 (61.3%) were(23). According to the Census Bureau, in 1994, 55.2% of all children under the age of six living with their single parent motherlived below the poverty level(24).

What may be an interesting observation of the realm of child support and parenting time is that even though fathers have a RPTO, ten of the fathers reported Some contact with their child within the last month. This is indicative of the widespread believe among our Court employees that there exists an informal parenting time network among parents who were never married. These fathers had paid almost 26% ($17,000) of the payments.

"The Court needs to be more sensitive to fathers' . . . my first visit to the Court was bad . . . I wasn't treated kindly . . . the treatment I received was based on stereotypes."

"The parent paying child support needs to be educated about the Friend of the Court system and how it works . . . if so they would get a better response."

"The key for the parents and the child is education."

CONCLUSION

Marsiglio(25) points out that there are two major movements as it relates to fatherhood occurring in this country today: the involved, nurturing father versus the uninvolved, more widespread dead beat parent who neglects and abandons his paternal

obligation. Society needs to strengthen the legal relationship between fathering a child and becoming responsible for that child. Fathers should behave responsibly toward their children and Court policies and programs should naturally assist with this connection. While many fathers have failed to support their children financially and emotionally, there does exist those fathers who are determined to be an important role model, influence and factor in their children's lives. Courts are at the forefront of this initiative.

"The Court system treats us fathers like criminals-just investigates us."

As the information above indicates, the correaltion between the payment of child support and the level of a father's involvement with his child can be directly related to the securing of a Parenting Time Order. The suggestions for increasing involvement of fathers with their children as outlined below may also assist children with establishing a realtionship with their fathers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

*Promotion of fatherhood by parents, religious leaders, educators, child support workers, sports stars, entertainers, grandparents and others that should stress to young men that fatherhood is a lifelong commitment and that society will not permit fathers to abandon their children. Role modeling of the importance of married life needs to be demonstrated to young men so that they can have hope, achieve self esteem and pride for the future. Children need to be taught the disadvantages of single parenthood, including the daily realities and hardships of parenthood. Parents and grandparents can do better for our children. Political, business and cultural leaders can do a lot better: they can make it easier rather than harder for families to raise children(26). Local civic, service and charitable organizations should be contacted to see what they are doing to promote and encourage fatherhood; special forums can be arranged in your community to inform the media and community leaders about the importance of fatherhood; workplaces need to be ensuring that they are father friendly. Education for young unmarried parents must be strongly encouraged by all communities(27). Irresponsible behavior such as dropping out of school must be strongly discouraged. Michigan's Governor John Engler's statement that "if students know that they'll have to pay to complete high school the second time around, maybe they'll stay in school and get their diploma the first time," has some merit(28).

*Young adults need to be educated to prevent them from having babies and fathers must be ready for the financial, emotional and legal responsibility of fatherhood. Education must begin in elementary schools related to self-esteem, respect and personal values.

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*Alternatives to child support payments, especially for young fathers. Credit could be given for provision of child care, attendance at parenting education classes, completion of high school, attending job training seminars or other endeavors that improve his employability or parenting abilities. As such, it makes more sense to encourage young fathers to initially provide what they are capable of rather than punish him and coerce him into a situation. Wage earning ability increases with time, education and experience.

*Parent education programs throughout all court systems must be mandated. Court rules and even legislative action is requiring parents to attend educational programs(29,30)

*Paternity should be established at the earliest possible moments in order to maximize the emotional, social and mental development of the child. The mandatory notice of pregnancy to be provided to the candidates for fatherhood by the second trimester of pregnancy. Pregnant women should be required to identify the father pre-birth through in-hospital programs. Affidavits could be available for the parents to sign before or shortly after the birth of their child. The program would provide for the identification of the mother and father, explain the custodial and support rights, responsibilities ,and options available to the parents and provide a mechanism for unwed and non-cohabitating parents to identify and record any voluntary agreement respecting the custody and support of the child. Birth certificates should include both parents' names when parentage is acknowledged. In-hospital paternity establishment forms should be used to encourage parties to voluntarily establish custody and visitation as well as financial support(31). States should legally presume that the document establishes paternity.

*Outreach services to fathers at the time of birth. Male outreach workers who are better able to empathize and sympathize with the father's needs for employment and or parenting education appear to be more acceptable to unwed fathers. Fathers are more likely to acknowledge paternity and commit to the child while in the "honeymoon period" with his child. Pre-birth outreach could include counseling services to help them deal with the stresses surrounding the upcoming birth, help them recognize the competing role requirements of young adulthood and parenthood and provide conflict resolution related to their relationship with the mother.

*Receipt of government benefits should be preconditioned on either the active and final establishment of paternity or verifiable proof of clear efforts toward obtaining the acknowledgment of paternity and active involvement of the biological father(32).

*Require the parents seeking child-care assistance to complete a form or certificate of eligibility in which they are required to demonstrate that no other member of the child's maternal or

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paternal family is willing to provide assistance. In cases where a father or family member is in a position to perform the care for the child at no cost, they should be allowed to care for the children rather than have the government pay childcare. In a society facing increasing instances of absent fathers, this requirement represents a way to keep fathers involved and strengthens the child's chances for economic and emotional success through immediate and extended family bonding(33).

*Notwithstanding the presumption of joint custody, if one parent applies for AFDC, the other parent should be considered first in determining alternative placement of the child so as to not require taxpayer subsidy. A policy favoring the placement of children in a custodial environment in which the parent is not receiving government assistance will provide the child with a more disciplined and otherwise healthy home environment conducive to the development of children. This policy would deter fraudulent filings and have the ancillary benefit of saving the government and taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars (34).

*Hold both parents responsible for the economic support of their children based upon their ability to earn. Just as both parents should provide for the emotional, psychological and intellectual needs of their children, both parents should be required to contribute to the economic well-being of their child, regardless of their level of income. Mothers who are receiving AFDC benefits should never less, support their children by reimbursing the government for those benefits, which would certainly make the welfare lifestyle less attractive and convey the message that to have a child requires financial responsibility from both parents. The past and current family/welfare policy has taught us two things, until the person who receives the benefits bears some responsibility for reimbursing the government for those benefit, the incentive for unwed pregnancy will continue and; until government policy allows fathers to become involved with their children, those children will continue to be at a high risk for criminal behavior, teen pregnancy and numerous other social abnormalities.

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